

THE EFFECT OF COMIC BOOKS ON THE IDEOLOGY OF CHILDREN*

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IN THE last four or five years, the comic book, a new medium aimed at the pre-adolescent child, has made an appearance on the American scene and taken its place alongside the movies and radio in children's interest. Ten to twelve million copies of about 100 different "funny" books are sold each month and the secondary circulation is even greater and includes many adults. This relatively uncensored visualized form of literature deals chiefly with adventure and mystery (spies, detectives, fifth columnists, superhuman feats, the supernatural, the pseudo-scientific, the horrible, and the gruesome). There is occasionally a conscious propaganda effort and in general a swing with sociological trends.

Our present study was undertaken not only because of a growing concern on the part of parents and educators as to the role these books should be allowed to play in the child's daily life, but also because of what seemed on the surface to be direct repercussions in the symptomatology of some of our patients following the reading of this new form of "literature."

Tracing back the origin of comics it was found that they were started in Germany about 1880 as newspaper circulation boosters and at that time were entirely in pantomime. Probably the origins could be traced even further back to the caricature employed in puppetry which was popular through Europe in this period. From 1887, when comics were brought to this country, until the middle of the First World War, the emphasis was on straight humor, but in 1915 adventure strips were started and caught the public's imagination. Up to this point the comics did not particularly cater to children but, with a few changes, were read and enjoyed by most age groups.

Five years ago two of the syndicates, purely for financial reasons, started to put some of the complete adventure stories into magazine form, reprinting old plates, necessarily reducing their size, which made the early books difficult to read. These comic books caught on immediately and gradually increased in circulation until a peak of 12,000,000 copies per month was recently reported. When individual publishers sprang up in the field two years ago they introduced what has been called "adventure of an advanced nature" with material much more vivid and exciting than that formerly produced. Although most of the magazines at present use the same general themes, some try to avoid gruesomeness and horror as much as possible, while others do little more than take material from the more lurid pulp-magazines and movies, like *Frankenstein*, and put it into picture form. Some of the former try to "improve" the minds of their readers by using book reviews and educational articles, whose chief purpose seems to be to make logical their often fantastic stories, using topics such as the possibility of life

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existing in the atmosphere on Mars, etc. As a rule right always wins out in the stories and the hero has a Robin Hood quality. Tarzan may kill, but only to eat. Often the tendency is to pattern the general theme of the plots on current happenings, national policies, etc. So true are they sometimes to fact that a short while ago a Nazi newspaper was reported to have protested against the anti-dictator policies of Superman. The tremendous potentialities of the comics as a propaganda agent was realized to some extent by the *Daily Worker* whose comic-strip character "Little Lefty" indulged in activities directly counter to those which "Little Orphan Annie" was carrying on in a strike. Some of the magazines have clubs such as the Justice Society of the U.S., and Supermen of America, whose slogans are always inspiring, righteous and patriotic. One club recently held a convention which thousands attended. The reading public of the comics is not confined to any one of the social and cultural levels of society.

Anyone in contact with children of school age, and particularly those working closely with children, sooner or later becomes conscious of the extent to which the constant reading of comic books has invaded their thinking, daily activities, and play. This varies from the rarer complete identification with the characters on a conscious level, to the more common patterning of play activities after those in the stories they read. The spontaneous art work of children in many instances concerns itself with the various heroes and what they have done in their more recent episodes. This specific interest of children is being capitalized on in many ways. An enterprising librarian in Baltimore, whose children's department had fallen off considerably, asked and received permission to put up a sign, "Superman recommends these books," whereupon circulation boomed. A large metropolitan department store found that a Christmas display featuring a comic book hero outranked even Santa Claus in the children's interest.

Our best gauge as to whether the comic book does good or harm is to evaluate the influence of the comics on the children's experiences in actual situations and children's verbal reaction to them. Can we actually trace the influence of comic strips as such in children's behavior? Do they lead to anxiety? Do they lead to aggression or other forms of asocial or delinquent behavior? Do they bewilder or confuse children? Have any efforts to control the comic strips avoided any of these? Some degree of insight into children's responses to comic books may be gained from an analysis of cases in which these "funnies" have had an active part in the reactions of the child.

CASES

1. Tessie, age 12, a Canadian Catholic girl referred from Children's Court, was found to be a child whose entire life had been filled with most dramatic asocial experiences involving both her parents. Her father had served a prison term before marriage for a killing growing out of his bootlegging and gambling activities. Her only memories of her father were concerned with wrangling in the home or his leaving home as a traveling salesman. He committed suicide by gas as the outcome of a quarrel between the parents over her. She was present when it

occurred, saw the details, and almost succumbed herself from gas poisoning. The mother, who at the time was suffering from inoperable cancer had many paranoid ideas. She frequented spiritualists and took the child with her. The understanding grew up between them that the mother of the man whom the father had killed was pursuing our patient to kill her for revenge. In addition, Tessie was extremely distressed on seeing her mother seriously ill but continually refusing medical care. She began to fail in school and showed a number of asocial attitudes, especially in the form of antagonism to authority. Also noted were many suicidal preoccupations and threats.

Observation over a period of time showed her to be constitutionally a normal child of average intelligence who presented emotional instability and neurotic features as a reaction to these traumatic experiences involving the people to whom she was most closely attached.

Psychiatric interview revealed her to have great personal charm, sensitive to social pressures and situations (especially the insecurity of her own) and reacting at times with defiance and aggression toward authority. She suffered from strong guilt feelings, believing herself responsible for her father's death and her mother's illness. She realized that her mother would soon die. She felt closely connected with her father, believing that she was being forced into following in his footsteps but having his voice warn her, however, not to do so. She felt that the mother of her father's victim would pursue her until she did follow the paternal career or else she would kill her. She felt inferior to other children in the classroom and in school felt utterly unable to succeed.

In her ward activities it was noticed that the girl tended to follow the more aggressive children, being easily influenced by them. She went through one period when she changed her first name, refusing to answer to her old one. Closer examination showed that she had adopted the name Shiera, that of the heroine in one of the comic book stories. In this particular series of comic books Shiera was the girl who always managed to get into trouble with gangsters, spies, and other unsavory characters, and was always rescued in time by the Flash. One of her sleepless nights and a series of vomiting spells occurred after the reading of one of the stories in which a master villain jumped off a cliff to escape the Hawkman and almost succeeded in taking the heroine with him, saying, "I'll die my own way, never at the hands of man." Even in the taking of medication could be traced the effect of comic book content, with the child expecting to receive from the pills she was given the powers acquired by certain of the comic book characters, such as the Hour Man, who obtained his supernatural powers from a "miracle" pill. In addition, Tessie expressed the idea that the "funnies" did her imagining for her (a thought expressed by several other children).

This overwhelmed child was attempting to find, via the comic books, a method of clarifying her confusing personal problems. By identifying herself with the heroine who is always rescued from perilous situations, she temporarily achieved an escape from her own difficulties. Her close association with the more aggressive children on the ward was probably a reflection of this same identification. From

this identification arose a relationship which was therapeutic in that it tended to allay her anxiety. In this the effect of the comic book was much like that of the puppet shows given on the ward. Constant reading of comic books also had the effect of diluting her conflicts over her close tie to her father, since over and over again good fought evil in the stories and always triumphed. Thus it is seen that instead of leading to asocial behavior, these comic books acted as a form of barrier against it. Rather than confuse her, it temporarily clarified and simplified her problems by offering her release from them.

The episode in the comic book which superficially was the cause of her sleeplessness and vomiting attack was easily traced in this case to the child's fundamental fears of death and her own suicidal preoccupations. The comic book situation acted merely as a precipitating factor in the production of symptoms by fitting the details of the child's psychic difficulties.

2. Milton, age 10, an American Jewish boy of average intelligence (IQ 101) was referred for stealing, disobedience, and truancy. He was born out of wedlock, but his father later married his mother under duress after his affair with her had caused his dishonorable discharge from the navy. He was brought up away from his father who showed only spasmodic interest in the family and there was no other male guiding element in his environment. In addition, the boy was blamed by his mother for her unhappy life. The delinquent activities of the child were accompanied by many evidences of anxiety. When doing "bad" things, voices in one ear told him to be good, while in the other ear he was being told to misbehave. His spare time was spent by preference in reading and rereading the exploits of his favorite comic book heroes, whose good deeds and triumphs over evil were his chief topics of conversation. He was particularly fond of the stories in which boys acted as aids to the principal characters. As one of three imaginary companions he talked with at bedtime, he included Robin, the young friend of the Bat Man, who is helping the enemies of crime, performing almost as well as his adult protector and earning the name of the "boy wonder." On the ward he tried to organize a group called the "minute men," the league of boys in the comics organized to help the Hour Man.

This boy, through his hallucinations and preoccupations, was trying to arrive at a successful ego-ideal which his parents had failed to give him. All of his conflicts over aggression, rejection and lack of security found solution in the comics. He found in them the content he needed, placed in a setting which the ideologies of the present time provide—fifth columnists, the conquest of the air and space by man, etc. They supplied for him in pictorial form the drama of the struggle between the super-ego, ego, and the id—a constant conflict between good and primitive "evil" instincts. Rather than fostering his delinquent drives, the comics acted as a support for his wavering super-ego, since invariably right triumphed. They formed in this case, therefore, a quite inexpensive form of therapy.

3. Helen, a Jewish girl of 11, had a markedly over-protective family who continually exerted excessive pressure on her to accomplish work beyond her level.

She had a congenital anomaly of her skull with flattening of the entire right side and very infrequent epileptic attacks. Psychometric studies showed she was a borderline mental defective with IQ 71, yet she had never failed in school because of constant plugging under stimulation at home. But she had already reached the top level of her scholastic ability and work was becoming impossible for her to comprehend. She was admitted to the hospital in a state of great agitation, with constant crying and wringing of hands, after a series of events which included the onset of her first menstrual period, the occurrence of one of her greatly upsetting grand mal seizures and the coming of a geography test in school which she was afraid of failing. Immediately preceding her so-called "hysterical" attack she had been reading a comic book in school and this was blamed by teachers and parents for her upset. In the story, a girl was framed into believing she had killed a man and was brought up on trial for it. The hero, who could fly through the air on wings, uncovered the plot and brought the evidence to court too late to save the girl from conviction. He then had to become invisible to free her from her jail cell, and bring the real murderer to justice.

Examination revealed a restless, preoccupied, unhappy child whose agitated depressive state was a reaction not only to her feelings of inadequacy in face of an impending and intolerable retardation in school, but also to overpowering feelings of guilt because of a series of death wishes she had expressed against both father and mother. Her interpretation of the comic book incident in school was, "In the funnies a bad girl killed someone. I cried when I read it. I went home. I couldn't sleep. I thought about the story and that I was going crazy and I wanted to kill my father because he hits me. I cried and I couldn't stop. I thought like in the funnies I was in court and on trial. Like they had me before the doctors in the hospital."

In this case again it is clear that the comic book material was merely a precipitating agent in the creation of disturbed behavior in the child. The story touched sensitized foci in her emotional life which responded to the stimulus obtained from reading. In this borderline defective girl's case there is a close parallel between her actual problems and the comic book plot—in many other cases the relationship is not as obvious. Her own unbearable situation was matched by that of the heroine who had also supposedly killed a man (her father). This child had misinterpreted and distorted part of the story to fit her own phantasy life, disregarding the constructive ending of the plot because she wasn't ready for it.

In this connection it has been determined that there are often almost as many interpretations not only of stories, but even single words, as there are children reading them. An interesting side-light on this point is children's ideas on the reality of the characters they read about in the comics. A total of 75 children were queried, ranging in age from 8 to 12, with an average IQ of 95 (81 to 105). Of the 75, 52 believed the heroes in the stories actually existed, although they were not sure of the other characters. Of the 52, 32 discriminated between heroes, saying that some were real, while others were fictitious.

4. Kenneth, age 11, came to the hospital with a background of life-long rejection, first by his unstable mother and alcoholic father who separated when he was 4, then in an unsupervised foster home and, finally, by his mother again when he was returned to her at a time when she was most unwilling to have him. His admission resulted from an unusually severe reaction after a homosexual experience forced on him by an adult, causing him to function on a defective level, mentally and socially, though his endowment was average. On the ward he was extremely unstable emotionally, at times overactive, and at others terrified and clinging to adults. He believed he would die in five years as a result of the assault on him because his rectum was filled with poison, and he was in constant danger of attack from the other boys on the ward and from adults.

Treatment in the form of psychotherapy, sedative medication, socializing therapy, group activities, hydrotherapy, etc., evoked a very slow response. He had, however, one relatively quiet, relaxed period in the hospital during which he insisted on wearing a Superman cape. He used his special robe as an excuse for not following routines and remaining with the girls' group. He boasted to the other patients, the nurses and doctors that he could leave the ward anytime by flying through the walls. Questioning revealed a feeling that at times he might be even better than Superman.

Through Superman this boy found a means of temporary release from his own fears and preoccupations. In his identification with this character who could never be harmed, he achieved a feeling of security which nothing else that was tried had succeeded in doing. In addition, he felt that the cape protected him from assault in the rear. At the same time it gave him an excuse to wear a garb which would more readily admit him to the sanctuary of the girls' group within which he felt safer. Another feature in the comics which struck a responsive chord in Kenneth was their hypomanic tempo, matching in many respects his own hyperkinesis (1).

The reaction of individual children to the cape, which is an essential part of the costume of a majority of the comic book heroes, is another instance of the decided difference in meaning the same object has to different children. To one it means having the power to fly, to another it has nothing to do with flying but represents a magical quality, to a third it means protection, to a fourth it is merely an ornament, to a fifth it means virility "because the U.S. Marines have capes," etc. Occasionally one finds a child who discriminates between the types of capes worn, attributing to each a different function.

Further to emphasize the range and non-specificity of children's reaction to comic books, we might briefly mention the 9 year old, deeply religious, Porto Rican Catholic boy with a verbal and reading disability, who identified himself so completely with the Bat Man that he adopted his picture as a signature, using it instead of his name on school work, letters, art work, his bed clothes, etc. This boy also had a rich phantasy life revolving about the saints, heaven and hell. When he started to read comic books he shifted his phantasies to include many

of the supernatural features in the stories. It was felt that he found it easier to accept as plausible many of these supernatural feats because through his religious training he started reading the comics with the premise that the supernatural existed.

DISCUSSION AND COMMENT

Comic books can probably be best understood if they are looked upon as an expression of the folklore of this age. They may be compared with the mythology, fairy tales and puppet shows, for example, of past ages. Fairy tales, ballads, nursery rhymes, etc., have been carried along from generation to generation by word of mouth until, finally, the most telling and presumably the best have been saved and subsequently put in print, dramatized and expressed through other art media. Mythology has found expression also in various forms of art. All of these are what we might call an outgrowth of the social unconscious; the social problems of the times are expressed through them. Many of them have so well stated the fundamental human problems that they have remained vital throughout the ages and are the literature of choice for children, although originally created by and for adults. Ferenczi (4) has discussed this problem in relation to fairy tales, saying, "Phantasies of omnipotence remain the dominating ones. Just where we have most humbly to bow before the forces of nature, the fairy tale comes to our aid with its typical motives. In reality we are weak, hence the heroes of fairy tales are strong and unconquerable. In our activities and knowledge we are cramped and hindered by time and space, hence in fairy tales one is immortal, is in a hundred places at the same time, sees into the future and knows the past. . . . In fairy tales man has wings, his eyes pierce the walls, his magic wand opens all doors. A man may live in perpetual fear of attack from dangerous beasts and fierce foes, in the fairy tales a magic cap enables every transformation and makes us inaccessible." One recognizes in this at once the same problems with which the comic book deals, differing only in that phantasies of omnipotence are expressed in terms more appropriate for the present age. Since our enemies are no longer animals, and man-to-man combat is much less, these time honored subjects are re-emphasized in the comics and replaced by the problems of science, mass organization and social ideologies. The magic in the comics is therefore expressed in terms of fantastic elaborations of science, with all-powerful rays, cosmic waves, flames, mechanized forms of transportation, such as interplanetary traffic systems, solar forces by which gravity is overcome, etc. There still remains, however, the magic powers of capes and caps seen in Superman, the Bat Man, the Flash, etc. Many of the heroes have merely magic power in their own body such as Pop Eye the Sailor Man, and the Flash. Red Comet can project himself by sheer willpower through space and time, he can make himself larger and smaller, he can perform prodigious stunts of strength. Furthermore, this power extends beyond his own body; he can transform his mechanized vehicle from land to water and vice versa. His associates may use guns with withering rays which paralyze the enemy. The greater magic needed in modern folklore is due to the greater dangers which assail society and the individual and which are often obscure due to scientific perfections, mechanized life, and group organizations.

As has been well stated by Moodie (3) normal, well adjusted children with active minds, given insufficient outlets or in whom natural drives for adventure are curbed, will demand satisfaction in the form of some excitement. Their desire for blood and thunder is a desire to solve the problems of the threats of blood and thunder against themselves or those they love, as well as the problem of their own impulses to retaliate and punish in like form. The comics may be said to offer the same type of mental catharsis to its readers that Aristotle claimed was an attribute of the drama. The effect of the comic book in normal children is comparable to the therapeutic effect in the emotionally disturbed child. Well balanced children are not upset by even the more horrible scenes in the comics as long as the reason for the threat of torture is clear and the issues are well stated.

If the child seems to react with some emotional or behavior disorder to reading the comic books, the reason predisposing him to the trigger action it supplies lies within the child and should be sought. It is evident from our case studies that whatever anxiety, aggression or confusion was attributable to comic books could be traced further back to the basic traumatic factors within the children's background.

It is felt that even the more obviously emotionally unstable child should not be deprived of the possible benefits he will gain from reading comic books. We have found that a policy of having an adult talk over with the child any conflicting or disturbing ideas or misconceptions which children have picked up in their reading is valuable in preventing untoward reactions due to lack of clarity of the issues or to a poorly understood threat against the child. This can be done whether or not the adult has himself read the comic book. An experiment is being carried out now at Bellevue to see whether such a clarification of the extremely common misinterpretations by children of not only the material in comic books, but also movies and radio stories, cannot be accomplished in groups in a setting such as a classroom, with the teacher, at first under the guidance of the psychiatrist leading an open discussion.

The chief conflict over comic books is in the adult's mind. Disregarding parents who read comic books themselves, the usual first reaction of the child's elders to this form of literature is a negative one. They are concerned about the supposed trash which usurps the place of good literature. It should be noted in this connection that some recently published children's stories by recognized writers are more prone to cause anxiety in children than are comic books. (See Bender and Schilder (12) footnote, page 1004, on Susanna B. and William C., by Rachel Field.)

We have shown in the cases of several children how comic book material fits the problems of the individual child. This is not only in regard to the child's attempt to understand his place in the world of modern science, warfare, and social organizations. It is also respecting his striving as an individual to solve his own everyday problems of right and wrong regarding aggression against him and his own impulses for aggression, counterbalanced against overwhelming feelings of inadequacies and inferiorities engendered by the lack of security in his own surrounding family relations and physical means. In this sense the comic books and

strips become the dream life of the social group or of the individual in his relationship to the social group. Lorand (5) has stated "fairy tales have a constructive value; they fulfill children's wishes; they have the same structure as dreams and their content is really nothing more than the disguised realization of wishes." He also quotes Freud (6) to the effect that "psychoanalysis confirms us in our recognition of how great an influence folk fairy tales have upon the mental life of our children. In some people the recollection of the favorite fairy tales takes the place of memories of their own childhood." Lorand goes on to state that fairy tales may afford an outlet for tension resulting from conflicts in adults as well. He quotes, however, a case in which the telling of the fairy story by the mother constituted a form of seduction of the child resulting in a neurosis which extended into the child's adult life. The question even here is whether the fairy tale caused the neurosis or whether it was not the relationship between the child and mother, with the fairy tale being merely the form of expression which the mother used. Any other form might have been substituted. Schilder (7) has shown in his analysis of Lewis Carroll and "Alice in Wonderland," how the personal problems of the adult may find expression in children's literature, tending to confuse children.

This same problem of the use of folklore in the understanding and psychotherapy of children has been dealt with by Bender and Woltman (8) in their use of puppet shows with problem children. It has become evident that identification with the puppet character and seeing and reacting to puppet plays, lends an excellent opportunity for the solution of many emotional and personal problems of the child. All these forms of literary expression are for the child a method of experimenting with the emotional problems of his life. We may recall that Tessie (Case 1) said the comics did her imagining for her. In this respect it is evident that comic books may be compared not only with the dreams of the child, but also with such phenomena as day dreams, hallucinations, and phantasied companions of childhood. As Bender and Lipkowitz (9), and Bender and Vogel (10) have shown, these are constructive phenomena in the psychological mechanisms of the child, whereby he solves ego and personality problems which arise from the undue aggression or inadequate help of the parents or from the parent-child relationship. In regard to comic books and strips we may say that the same problems are dealt with, except that perhaps the emphasis is more on the social problems or the child's relation to the larger social order. However, in many cases these are merely symbolic of a child's more intimate personal problems.

The remarkable phenomenon of the enormous success of comic strip writers in satisfying the child's needs in this regard is something that should make any of us humble in trying to become critics. That they supply a real need for the child there can be no doubt. That writers who produce these comics do not have psychological insight into the child's needs, there can also be no doubt, just as the author of Oedipus Rex did not have the psychoanalytic understanding of his dramatic production that we now have. It appears, however, that we do well to trust to the unconscious expressions of the comic writers. Efforts to remove magic from the plots, for example, would remove just that factor which makes it possi-

ble for the child to deal with the overwhelming feelings of inferiority and inadequacy in these threatening times. Yarnell's (11) study of "Firesetting in Children" shows that children may resort to really dangerous means of evoking magic to protect them against overwhelming odds.

In its early days the comic book was thoroughly censored because the material had been previously edited to satisfy the newspaper editors who bought the daily strips. The independent publishers, however, had no such rein on their subject matter. As a result, the only check on what is produced at present is what children will buy. On the whole, children have managed this form of censorship fairly well. They form an extremely critical segment of the reading public, especially when they must spend their own dimes for what they read. They consistently select comic magazines with the better art work and greater detail. The books with inferior art, too much spreading of subject matter, etc., fall out in a short time. They demand their money's worth of blood and thunder. When one editor heeded adult criticism and took the more hideous features off his character called "The Face," a flood of letters came from children asking to have the fangs, horns, and weird color restored. Many of the magazines encourage the evaluations and suggestion of their readers, sometimes giving prizes for the best ones. Some scathing indictments of comic books have appeared in the press and current periodicals. Editor Elzey Roberts of the St. Louis *Star-Times* in 1938 saw in the comics only fights, murder, domestic quarrels, fear, theft, despair, deception, torture, arson, and death. An article in *Forum* in 1936 denounced comics for portraying among other things sadism, cannibalism, bestiality, crude eroticism, torturing, killing, kidnapping, raw melodrama, crimes, criminals, vulgarity, etc. Stirling North, in the *Chicago Daily News*, added a stirring protest in a similar vein. Parent-Teacher Associations have written objections. The United Parents Association is said to have appointed a committee to investigate the modifiability of the prevalent type of story. Some agitation has also come from the old line boy's magazines which have suffered greatly in circulation since the advent of comic magazines. All these voices have had little effect—children's likes and dislikes are still the deciding factor in what script-writers and artists produce.

Subject matter in the comics deals with fundamental problems presented in caricature form. It may be remembered in this connection that caricature has been described by Kris (2) as a means of freedom to be primitive. Aggression is dealt with in most of the stories, but its purpose as carried out by the hero is to prevent hostile and noxious aggression by others. Punishment is a constant factor, but it is justified punishment. Social insecurity appears again and again as the plots unfold, and its usual solution is portrayed as being found in group loyalties. A strikingly advanced concept of femininity and masculinity is displayed. Women in the stories are placed on an equal footing with men and indulge in the same type of activities. They are generally aggressive and have positions which carry responsibility. Male heroes predominate, but to a large extent even these are essentially unsexed creatures. The men and women have secondary sexual mannerisms, but in their relationship to each other they are de-sexed. Sexual

problems concern the comic book writers very little at the present time. The nuclear problems which concern them are group aggression and group loyalties, the scientific problems of overcoming time, space and gravity, and threats of social and economic insecurity.

In conclusion, we repeat that the comic strip is the folklore of the times, spontaneously given to and received by children, serving at the same time as a means of helping them solve the individual and sociological problems appropriate to their own lives.

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